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THE SIGNS OF LIFE IN CONGREGATIONALISM: GENUINE AND SPURIOUS.

THE SERMON

BEFORE THE

National Council of the Congregational Churches.

OF THE UNITED STATES,

AT ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, NOVEMBER 11, 1880,

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BY

REV. SAMUEL E. HERRICK, D. D.

OF BOSTON, MASS.

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SERMON.

BY REV. SAMUEL E. HERRICK, D. D., OF BOSTON, MASS.

"*This is an evil generation: they seek a sign.*" — ST. LUKE xi. 29.

BY the words "this generation," our Saviour meant the great mass of contemporary Jews; and in rating it as an evil generation, he judged it by the samples which came to the top. These Scribes and Pharisees who came to him demanding a sign, were the exponents of certain forces which were at work in the national character. They did not form that character; but were rather the outgrowth, and so the expression of it. They were themselves an "outward and visible sign" of an inward and spiritual fact. The blossoms upon the topmost branches of the tree come out of the sap that is circling through the structure underneath. The unseen chemistry of the remotest fibres reports itself up yonder, beneath the open sky. The hands upon the dial-plate of the town-clock are so closely and constantly related to the movements down below, that what goes on there, out of sight and hearing, is published unmistakably overhead to all the world. Whether false or true to the figures, they are true to the works.

Whether in a civil government, like our own, or in an ecclesiastical polity, like that of the churches convened in this Council, the movements of men in lofty places thus acquire peculiar significance. They are exponential, — representative, in the truest sense. They express and expound the character of the forces which have raised them to their position. They speak of what is going on in our neighborhoods and churches; in our homes and their domestic economies; nay, even in our closets, and in those hidden fountains of personal character, the depths of our own hearts. The pulpit, the politics, the press, the public economy of a nation are, in the main, just what the people want. They are forced upon men by no despot save the despotic craving of their own desires. When the people really feel in their heart of hearts that it is a time to weep, no public clown dares to crack his jests. When the great soul of the nation or the church mourns, no representative buffoon will presume to dance. Conspicuous social phenomena often show what is

passing through the private heart. "Tendencies silently operating on you and me, unmarked by others, unsuspected even by ourselves, may have conspicuous expression in the literature, the taste, the morals of those who claim to be the standards of the age. Lights of self-knowledge may, therefore, flash upon us from the open spaces of the world, and the broad pavement of our time may serve to us as the secret confessional." [1]

So these Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, said Christ within himself, are fairly exhibiting the spirit and temper of the people at large. Their coming and demanding of him a sign so pertinaciously as they did was an evidence of the low religious condition to which the masses of the people had sunk. "This is an evil generation: they seek a sign."

Every period of national history, doubtless, may be distinguished by some inordinate craving, which makes the tone and tendency of the time, which is apt to degenerate into a popular vice, and which may become the prelude to national decay and extinction. At this time we know among the Greeks it was a passion for superficial speculation and eloquent speech: their heroes were orators and sophists. Among the Romans it was a lust after territorial dominion: they deified their emperors and successful generals. And among the Jews it was a craving after the sensuous, the showy, the wonderful in matters pertaining to religion. Through a long course of years — indeed, we might say for centuries — this vicious tendency had been growing. They had left far behind them "the simple fervors of an earnest and prophetic age," and had become a generation of sign-hunters and marvel-mongers. They had arrived at that paradoxical attitude which manifests an intense "interest in the representations of religion, while evading contact with its realities." The magnificent ritual which was intended to be the adumbration of great spiritual realities had overshadowed and wellnigh extruded all moral loyalty, and so, from having been august, had become petty. The shadows and signs of holiness had become real, and holiness itself had become unreal and shadowy. They made much of washing the body, but ignored cleanliness of soul. "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess." They wrote the letter of the law on their phylacteries, but preserved no reverence for its spirit.

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[1] James Martineau.

They made long prayers in public places, but were wanting in real and loving devotion. They held in immense veneration the letters which spelled Jehovah's name,— no human ear ever heard it from their lips; but they ignored the universal presence of that awful Spirit which would have lifted their petty lives into dignity and expanded them into divine generosity. They built and beautified the sepulchres of the prophets whom their fathers had slain, but in spirit were partakers of their fathers' crimes, and shared with them the guilt of shedding righteous blood. They had their canonical hours, canonical robes, and canonical forms of prayer; but they were like the cinders of a flameless altar, their light and warmth gone out. In fine, they had a wonderfully orthodox *theory* of religion; but all that they regarded as worth their while in religion was so much of it as could be seen and heard. And so, when the Messiah came among them, the purity, the gentleness, the peaceful power, the spiritual grace and beauty of the wonderful man all passed for naught; but the signs and wonderful things that he did or did not do, these were the grand reasons why he should be received or rejected. "An evil generation," surely, whose whole character and religion and daily study could be condensed and made perpetually memorable in two words, — *σημεῖον ἐπιζητεῖ* — they seek a sign.

And any generation that comes to emphasize signs, and rest in them rather than in things signified,— in the external expressions of religion, its forms and phrases, its doings and its noise, rather than in the reality itself,— is an evil generation. It incurs the terrible upbraiding of the Master, "Woe unto you, hypocrites!"

Wherever there is life, it must needs advertise itself, whether the life be natural or spiritual. Nature is full of signs. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge." She does not go about to seek them, to be sure. She has something to express, and expresses it. The smile upon the face of the infant, spontaneously eloquent of a happiness of which it knows neither the meaning nor the cause; the merry shout of boyhood, without articulation or dictionary significance, giving vent to the exuberance of irrepressible mirth; the melody of birds and the bursting buds of spring-time, the outward and visible signs of Nature's invisible and mysterious life; the colors of the sky, attesting by their massing and their changes the marshalling or the disbanding of her stormy forces, — in a word, all natural phenomena are signs.

And there is this to be noticed about them all, without exception: they are signs, indeed. They *signify*, and signify adequately, underlying facts. They are true and righteous altogether. There is no disproportion, no deception, no false pretence. There is no exaggeration and no depreciation of the thing signified. The mass and hue of foliage exactly correspond to the kind and degree of vigor that is in the tree. The shape and marking of the leaf infallibly indicate the family to which it belongs. The bramble never masquerades as an oak. The oak never pretends to assume the humility of the myrtle. So Nature's signs, and all true signs, rise spontaneously out of the real condition of things. They are not assumed; they emanate. A sign that were made, manufactured to order, such as the Pharisees demanded of Christ, would be no *sign*. It would signify nothing. It must come spontaneously out of fact. And so Nature is true, like the God that made her. She never says more than she means. She never hangs out wired flowers. She never acts out of real character.

But when we rise from the realm of unconscious life into that of intelligent action, we find that man has the power, and for the most part the desire, to say somewhat more than he thinks or feels, and to assume to be something more than he is; to make the sign greater than the fact, or even to exhibit the sign when there is nothing to be signified. How vastly different would the world be, socially, politically, morally, spiritually, if all that we see and hear were honest exponents of fact; if there were always wealth corresponding to the signs of wealth, friendship equal to the appearances and professions of friendship, honesty according to honest seeming, honor proportionate to honorable pretence, statesmanship up to the claims of so-called statesmen, and simple morality, even, where religion seems to be!

Now, this tendency to exalt a sign to the place of reality, or (to use a figure suggested by one of the political issues of the hour) to put paper for gold, when it arises in the religious life of a man or a people, is a disastrous thing. When there is self-deception and treachery in religious matters, it will infiltrate downward until it pervades and corrupts all the strata of life. There is no vice whose canker spreads so fast and eats so deep as that of religious hypocrisy. When men or a community begin to emphasize form instead of fact in religion, they are opening the sluice-gates to unnumbered evils, — moral, social, even political. When religion is converted into outward action, then business and society also will inevitably be converted into systematic treachery. There will be

a seeming of wealth, but not wealth; the forms of honesty, but not honesty. There will be sham courtesies, and polite falsehoods, and professions of friendship, and lying flatteries. The life of the people will become a hollow mockery. And this was the reason why Jesus pronounced a woe upon the sign-loving generation of his day. It was not so much a threat as a declaration of the inevitable tendency of their lives of religious sham and pretence. He read out the doom which was being self-written upon the universal spirit of the people. Men may dupe one another, and dupe themselves, but they cannot dupe the everlasting laws of God's universe. Counterfeits may pass sleekly enough for a while in the marts of human ignorance, but they are all rung down sooner or later upon the counter of Heaven, and their career is at an end.

In the age of the Stuarts, an age whose condition was largely such as I have now described, our Congregationalism had its birth; or, rather, as we believe it to have been of primeval origin, perhaps I ought to say its renascence. It came forth as a protest against a religion of the senses, and as putting a new emphasis upon that which is unseen and spiritual. The Fathers cared little for the husks of things, but everything for the kernel. John Cotton, in parting from Old England, to preach in the thatched meeting-house of the first church of Boston, in New England, wafted no sighs of regret behind him for the stately St. Botolph's. Perhaps we may have queried at times whether, in their eagerness to exscind all signs that did not signify, they did not trim the vine of the church's life too close; whether they might not have left here and there some gracefully hanging boughs and delicate tendrils, which would have conciliated the men and women and children of very sensitive, æsthetic nature. But when we remember that the church had become like an overladen beast of burden, that is intolerant even of straws; that things easy enough to bear when they are the natural forth-putting and expression of life, like the wings of a bird, become insufferable weights when bound on by the cords of exterior obligation, we justify and thank them. "The church had become incrusted with many successive layers of corrupt innovation. For ages these accretions had been forming one upon another. The wish of the Puritans was to peel off these laminæ, and to remove them all, till they should come down to the original, proper substance of the church. They were for unwinding the interminable mummy-cloths by which the church had been nearly bandaged into a corpse, and so restoring her to life and

enjoyment, to beauty and action. They followed the plan of stripping off all those usages which could not plead the recorded inspiration of the Bible in their favor. They rejected every canon and custom of whose origin they could tell the date and of whose originators they could give the names. And when all these foreign, uncongenial, and injurious inventions, which had been superimposed upon the primitive discipline, had been removed, they found, as the result, our noble Congregational Church Polity." [1]

And this was heroic treatment, and in a sense dangerous; dangerous to them and to their successors forever. It bequeathed to our churches a function and a duty the alternative to which would in all future time be worse than extinction. It held up the fathers themselves to a high style of spiritual life, and laid the same necessity upon those who should come after them. From that time to this the obligation resting upon Congregationalism has been to stand as a witness for the worth and necessity of spiritual religion in the world. Its motto has been: "Not the sign, but the fact." "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." It seeks to appeal, not to the lust of the eye or to the pride of life, but to the chastened imagination, the faith, the heart of mankind. Its religion must be a spiritual religion, or it is less than nothing, and vanity. It builds no cathedral, that shall awe by the stately grandeur of its architecture, and marshals through long-drawn aisles no processions of lawned and mitred prelates; it adopts no elaborate cultus, and sets forth no venerable liturgy or prayers of exquisite beauty; it claims no exclusive descent through the chrism of sacerdotal or prelatic impartation, and for the most part wears no distinctive garb; it has nothing about it sacramentarian or ritualistic; it has no majestic machinery of government, — boasts, indeed, as little organization as possible; it depends solely upon the gospel, which it holds forth in word and life, for its power and propagation. Therefore, it is most excellent, or it is most execrable. If it have not the faith, the indwelling power of the Spirit of God, it has nothing. Other systems, if they have not life, may preserve its semblance, or, at least, the appearance of seemly and decorous decay; but Congregationalism cannot die decently. It has provided itself beforehand

[1] Life of John Cotton, by A. W. McClure, page 47.

with no seemly grave-clothes. Without the inner and spiritual reality, it is hideous and repulsive. Other churches may be corpses, but if so, they are corpses rolled in linen, corpses embalmed in sweet-smelling spices, corpses adorned with flowers. But the corpse of Congregationalism is nothing but a corpse, — cold, odious, repulsive. As soon as it is dead, men know it and flee from it. By as much as it is most excellent in its normal and vital development, by so much is it most worthless when reduced to its lowest terms.

And yet it has and must have, by the analogy of all life, its signs. As an intellectual force, it has made for itself a history and a literature of which it needeth not to be ashamed. It has given much, but borrowed little, in this respect. The penetrant and diffusive power of its thinking has passed through or over all denominational boundaries. Its boughs have overhung the walls, and men have plucked its clusters without stint upon the other side. The Edwardses, Bellamy, Hopkins, Emmons, Dwight, Taylor, Beecher, Bushnell, — how their thoughts have become as an atmosphere for the world to breathe! The Presbyterian, Dr. Finley, could only explain the premature death of the elder Edwards, in his fifty-fifth year, by saying: "He was pouring in a flood of light upon mankind, which their eyes as yet were unable to bear." Twenty years ago, or more, I went to call upon a ripe theologian of another order, and found him reclining upon his couch, in the incipient stages of what proved to be his last illness, absorbed in a volume that had been recently published. And his first remark was: "A wonderful man, this Bushnell. He takes hold of me."

Nor has the *spiritual* vitality of our order, as distinguished from its intellectual, been wanting in external manifestations. Tides of spiritual influence, coming and going like the wind that bloweth where it listeth, have borne witness at times — though at intervals too infrequent, it must be confessed — to the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Ghost.

And, finally, the life of the denomination has, during the current century, been attested as never before in a more adequate appreciation of the significance of our Saviour's last command, in the consecration of its wealth to the work of God's Kingdom in the world and in its far-reaching missionary operations.

These are our signs, and in the main we may believe that they have not been assumed or sought after, but have been true signs, outward and visible, of inward and spiritual fact. They have been

not attachments to, but expressions of, the church's hidden life. By these things our faith and order have professed a good profession before many witnesses.

But we may by no means complacently assume, my brethren, that because our religious life has expressed itself after such a lofty manner, rather than in those minor matters which appeal to the eyes and ears of men, therefore we are free from the sign-seeking and sign-loving spirit which our Saviour condemns. The danger is more subtle on this very account. The tendency which is common to human nature, rather than peculiar to any system of order or doctrine, may be all the more likely to seize and infect us that we reject all signs of a grosser sort. Just as those who have least visible virtue to boast of often boast the loudest; just as those who have little wealth to be complacent over are often most intensely complacent over the little they have; or as a hen with one chicken is notably more fussy than one with a multitudinous brood, — so those who abjure a multiplicity of outward insignia may become unduly conceited over the few tokens they exhibit. And you will bear with me, fathers and brethren, if I indicate what seem to me to be a few of the peculiar sources of our danger, leaving it to your own insight to discern, or to your ingenuity to suggest, any others for yourselves.

There are three or four directions in which the sign-seeking and sign-loving spirit is peculiarly likely to be developed among us. And

1. In the endeavor to *say more than is actually felt or thought.* Utterance, when used aright, is a most important aid, both to feeling and to faith. When it is purely and simply an expression of these, and nothing more, it reacts upon them, — becomes most beneficently reflexive. It strengthens and confirms the interior life from which it springs, as the foliage of the tree, exactly expressing its hidden energy, in turn increases that energy and helps it forward to a new degree. A thought fitly uttered becomes more certainly the thinker's own. A feeling adequately expressed is thereby deepened and intensified. When a man can say, "I believed, and therefore and thus I have spoken," he may almost immediately reverse the assertion, and say, "I have spoken, and therefore I so believe." But it is to be questioned whether men generally are content, at least in religious matters, to limit their utterance by faith and feeling. Religious expression is very apt to be disproportionate to the facts upon which it is based. Not that

men are intentionally dishonest in this matter. They fall into the error unconsciously. Perhaps the explanation is to be found along this line. Recognizing, at least theoretically, that real spiritual religion is the best of all possessions, and what they ought to possess in the fullest measure of their capacity, good men are ashamed that they have so little of it; and they are unconsciously tempted to make up in appearance for what they lack in reality, — *i. e.*, they multiply the signs. Just as many a man who does not like to pass on 'Change for what he is really worth — it is so little it would hurt his credit, it might damage his social position — is tempted to keep up the appearances and signs of wealth, so men in their religious life, it is to be feared, are sometimes led to express emotions which they do not feel, to utter petitions for which they really have in their hearts no corresponding desires, and to profess as their creed what they neither intelligently, nor fully, nor even for substance believe. An inversion, surely, of the order of nature and of grace. Multiplying signs cannot develop life. Increasing life will develop signs. And the evil is not confined to the individual. It runs up through the church and into the great assemblies of the associated churches. Great aggregations of men, assembled in religious conference for public action, who are bound together by the sympathies of common origin, common traditions, common faith, and venerable history, are notably apt to say somewhat more than they believe. It is said, and I know no reason to doubt it, that a large number of delegates to the Vatican Council went there wholly opposed to the doctrine of Papal Infallibility; yet in the final vote only one or two voted against it. What glamour was there about the whining, decrepit old man that changed the belief of these men so suddenly? None at all. They believed after they had said their *credo* just as they had before. Creeds are not to be manufactured. They grow, as the worlds are grown, by great secular development. They change their forms imperceptibly to the eye of the contemporary beholder. They emanate from the closets, from the pages of tear-stained Bibles, from the chambers of solitary suffering, from the midnight Bethels, where uncrowned princes prevail with the Angel of the Covenant, and get new names in new and mighty experiences. They come from those serene and silent heights where long-trained and long-watching eyes have at last beheld the nebulous hint revealing itself in stellar distinctness and beauty. Not infrequently they are precipitated in the fires of persecution, or come forth, no man can tell how, from age-long conflict between the

church of God and the forces of surrounding evil. Literature, even secular and profane, government and politics, commerce and international intercourse, each adds its touch to the growing thing. No *true* creed was ever *made*. Ridiculous story that, about that most venerable symbol, the so-called Apostles' Creed, being constructed as men would frame a barn, each apostle bringing his timber over his shoulder. Such manufacturing has been attempted since, at various times, and very likely will be attempted again. But it reminds one of that terrible sarcasm of the old prophet about the manufacture of idols. "The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. He that is so impoverished, that he hath no oblation [no gold or silver of his own to bring] chooseth a tree that will not rot [if it be bog-oak, exhumed from some ancient fen, so much the better]; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved. They helped every one his neighbor. So the carpenter encouraged the goldsmith, and he that smootheth with the hammer him that smote the anvil, saying, It is ready for the soldering, and he fastened it with nails, that it should not be moved."

When the church has a mighty faith, it will have a mighty creed. When it does not believe much, the temptation is strong, lest men should find it out, to set about telling how much it does believe.

Let no one misinterpret me as not believing in creeds. I do. I must have one. I am only contending that it shall be no more or less than simply exponential. I would have no part of it to be uttered below the breath. I would have it express less than is really believed, rather than more. It should grow wholly up out of the roots of actual faith; should be *ex animo* to the least article, with not a syllable wired on for effect, as we sometimes see at feasts flowers and fruit wired for show upon dead twigs.

2. The same spirit is peculiarly likely to be developed among us *in frantic endeavors to exhibit spiritual vitality.*

Those tides of spiritual influence which now and then pass over the churches, known as revivals of religion, doubtless rise and fall in accordance with a law as fixed as that of the rhythm of the waters of the globe or the movement of the seasons. Scripture itself seems to recognize the fact. The voice of the beloved to his bride, — "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the

turtle is heard in our land," — has always been regarded as the poetic expression of the great spiritual truth. This rhythmic character of the spiritual life is something which belongs to man as truly as the systole and diastole of the blood which flows in his veins. "Tell me not," says a venerable thinker, renowned for his wonderful power of spiritual intuition, — almost like that of a St. John,[1] — "tell me not that these undulations of the soul are the mere instability of enthusiasm and infirmity. Are they not found characteristically in the greatest and deepest men, — Augustine, Tauler, Luther? Nay, did not the Son of God himself, the very type of our humanity, experience them more than all? Did he not quit the daily path, now for a transfiguration and now for a Gethsemane? Did not his voice burst into the exclamation, 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven,' yet also confess, 'Now is my soul troubled'? And had he not his hours on the mountain all night? And what think you passed beneath those stars? Ah, no! Those intermittent movements are the sign of divine gifts, not of human weakness. God has so arranged the chronometry of our spirits that there shall be thousands of silent moments between the striking hours." But I well remember that in the old-fashioned household clock in the home of my boyhood there was a wire let down, which, by certain manipulation, would cause the old timepiece to strike at any time and any number of times, between the true striking hours. And it used to be my mischievous delight to strike the old clock around, greatly to the confusion of all who depended upon it for time, and equally to the injury of the abused machinery. It struck at length without proper cause, and upon all sorts of improper occasions. It became utterly treacherous and false. Its old-time dignity and solemnity gave place to garrulity and bad faith. All signs, and no truth in any of them!

We have made much, and rightly, of those high-striking hours which have marked the progress of the church's spiritual life. We hail their coming with joy and gratitude unspeakable. But may it not admit of question, my brethren, whether, in our eagerness after signs, we do not take the chronometer into our own hands and try to strike it around for ourselves? May it not admit of question whether tendencies are not being developed more or less broadly in our churches which are displacing the true revival spirit by a weak and dangerous counterfeit? Is there not a spirit abroad which depre-

[1] James Martineau.

ciates the normal and beautiful rhythm of the Spirit's work, by demanding that if signs are not abundantly apparent, they shall be created? that if the leaven of the Kingdom be not spreading evidently upon the surface, we shall throw in certain powders of our own to produce a yeasty and effervescent commotion? God forbid that I should utter a single word in disparagement of those movements of the heavenly breath which He sends from time to time to quicken his people and to convince and convert the world. "Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out." But God has honored for ages the constitution and orderly methods of his church; and he will honor them still. Not fitfulness, but faithfulness, is the condition and the characteristic of life. And when faithfulness pervades the life of our churches, as the law of its formation pervades the structure of the calc-spar crystal from the unit of its mass down to its minutest fragment; when men are *simply faithful* in the pulpit, in the Sunday school, in the prayer-meeting, in the family, in the closet, and in the daily business of their lives, no factitious signs will be sought for or desired to vindicate the sufficiency of the church for the work that is given her to do, — the work of redeeming and renovating the world.

3. The same spirit is often developed in *an undue regard for uncertain or even false measures of strength*. I mean numerical measures.

The time has long passed by when Congregationalism could make more than a feeble showing in the census of religious denominations. Nor do I know that we ought very much to care, — if indeed we ought not to be glad. The fact may put us upon the endeavor to secure a more excellent dynamic than that of which numbers are the criterion. This counting is a heinous and radical vice. We count our attendance at prayer-meeting, the scholars in the Sunday-school class and in the school, the church attendance in rain and shine, the increasing or diminishing number of churches, and the whole number of communicants in them all, and the grand total is cause for a shout of congratulation or a wail of despair; when it may very likely be true that the life of the churches would be of a better quality, — more forceful and more fruitful, — if we could be rid of some thousands that are as cumbrous as dead wood to a growing tree. Numbers are weakness sometimes. I remember that a famous band of Hebrew warriors were but a handful, compared with the hosts against whom they had to contend. I

remember that that handful of three hundred were sifted men, from whom as chaff and refuse twenty-and-two thousand had been separated as fearful and afraid, and then more than nine thousand more, leaving a little fragment, who had their own way of doing things, even to lapping water from the brook. I remember that of a certain feeble town it was said: "Thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, art little among the thousands of Judah; yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that shall rule in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old: from everlasting." I remember that it is written in the Book of God, and on every page of secular history, that "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence." I remember that a few, with God, have been, through all recorded time, a conquering and unconquerable host. I am not of those who grudgingly count the dollars that we have put into union societies for other denominations to control and to spend, or who regretfully speak of men who have gone out from us to build up churches for another order, or who reproachfully look after the leaders whom our institutions have trained for pulpits of a different name. Has the grand cause for which we all are laboring been thereby weakened? Much as we love Congregationalism, do we not love the kingdom of our Redeemer more? Shall we not count it a privilege and an honor that — at the cost of our own numbers and our own wealth — we have been permitted for a hundred years to diffuse the leaven of our thought and spirit, and so prepare for the coming of the time when none shall say, "I am of Paul," or "I of Apollos," or "I of Cephas," but when all shall confess, "I am of Christ." There is hardly to be imagined a more fallacious exponent of true strength than the footing up of statistical tables. They are treacherous signs. Let the sign-mongers adopt and cherish them. The apostles of the early church left us their figures up to the time of Pentecost. After that they soon forgot to count. The Arabic signs are not used in heaven, nor do the balances of the sanctuary weigh avoirdupois. When piety and spiritual power and the diffusive energy of holy character can be measured by yards and bushels and thermometer scales, figures will tell the truth when applied to the life and growth of the churches. God tells us what he thinks

of human calculations when he says that a little one shall become a thousand and a small one a strong nation. The beneficent forces which he sends forth for the blessings of nature and of man mock figures, both by their insignificance and their might. The handful of corn waves like Lebanon. And out of this fact grows the last danger that I shall mention, viz.: —

4. That the spirit which our Saviour deprecated asserts itself *in complacency at the magnitude of external machinery and visible success.*

The gigantic growths of the Sierras are products of a teacupful of pine seed, wafted thither in some inconspicuous fashion, no man can tell when or whence or how. They have become the wonder of the world. Like these in their magnitude, so apparently disproportionate to their feeble origin, are the great societies and their work which have sprung out of the faith and prayer of our churches within the current century. They are signs of a wonderful vitality in the past. Had the faith and order of our fathers given birth to no other offspring than the Board with the alphabetical name, they would have vindicated their claim to the recognition and gratitude of all the world. But in the light of this discussion, is it not quite possible that these admirable boards of ours, from being real exponents, may come to be simply the boast of an "evil generation"? They are the forth-reaching, far-reaching hands by which the churches do the Lord's commissioned work. But what were a giant's hands to him if the giant's heart and brain were atrophied or paralyzed? What to the country or to the world were the magnificent river on whose bank we are assembled, if all the secret mountain springs should cease their flow by day and night? It was whispered to me that in a meeting of the Woman's Board of Missions, the other day, — which we men, you know, were not privileged to attend, — the president said to the assembled ladies: "I want to tell you a secret. It is a matter I have never mentioned before. The secret is that of the wonderful success of the Woman's Board. Several of the ladies, many of whom have now passed away, have had regular seasons, some weekly, some daily, of private prayer for our work from its very inception. And now I am constrained to mention this because there must be others to come in and fill the thinning ranks of these persistent supplicants."

Is there any monument of antiquity more sadly suggestive than that famous sculpture on the Arch of Titus which represents the

Golden Candlestick of the Jewish Temple, borne upon the shoulders of exultant heathen, — the reminiscence of a dead religion, the epitaph of a nation that perished because it loved its signs more than the hidden life they were intended to set forth?

We have our seven-branched candlestick, and we may rejoice that its beams shine so brightly and penetrate so far. But the principal thing about the candlestick is the oil by which its branches are secretly fed; and that is not in the legacies of Otises and Smiths, but in the ten thousand green olive-trees which strike their roots down in secret places all over the land. It is in the spiritual life of faith and prayer, lived in thousands of inconspicuous homes and tens of thousands of hallowed oratories, which witness an unbroken commerce with the skies. Let us interrupt that commerce, to admire the superb structure of our candlestick, or to waste our energies in its laudation, or in strife about the pre-eminence of its branches, and the very heathen shall hold up in exultant mockery the quenched and empty symbols of our preterite faith.

The subject, therefore, my brethren, comes home personally to every one of us. Signs of life are not life, because they may be manufactured. Life itself is the breath of God moving upon the soul of man, humbled at his feet, lying open to his free and gracious and constant inspiration. In an organization like ours, the individual is peculiarly the unit of influence, not the church or the minister. The denomination must be what its humblest members are. The consecration of the whole is in the fidelity of its elements. Let us make our order a power *for* God, by receiving into our own souls the power *of* God. Let us each adopt for himself that which, on the eve of his ordination, Charles Kingsley laid down as his special rule in life, in these words, worthy to be graven on the heart of every minister and every layman with a pen of iron and the point of a diamond: "To be an example and an instrument of holiness before the Lord forever; to dwell in his courts; to preach in his temple; to feed his sheep; to carry his lambs and bear them to their Foster-Mother, whose love never fails, whose eye never sleeps, — the Bride of God, the Church of Christ."

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